SO! Reads: Danielle Shlomit Sofer's Sex Sounds: Vectors of Difference in Electronic Music

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Abstract

DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/5j24f-ydq38 *Sex Sounds: Vectors of Difference in Electronic Music* (MIT Press, 2022) by Danielle Shlomit Sofer brings a complex analysis for contemporary de-colonial, queer and feminist readers. This book did its best to sustain an argument diving into eleven case studies and strongly problematising the Western white cis gaze.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Music History and Culture (Topic), Aesthetics, Book Review, Cultural Studies, Dance/Movement, Electronic Music



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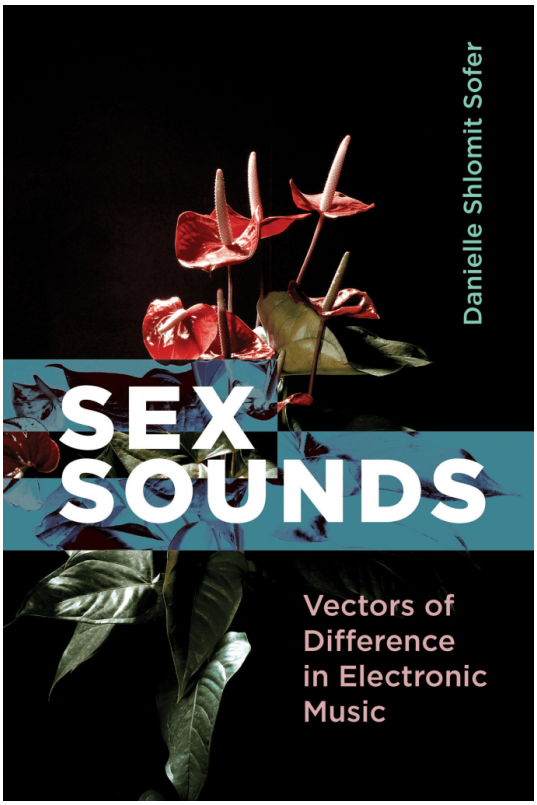
> *Distance, therefore, preserves a European austerity in recorded musical practices, and electroacoustic practice is no exception; it is perhaps even responsible for reinvigorating a colonial posterity in contemporary music as so many examples in this book follow this pattern– Danielle Shlomit Sofer, Sex Sounds, 14.*



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Sex Sounds: Vectors of Difference in Electronic Music (MIT Press, 2022) by Danielle Shlomit Sofer brings a complex analysis for contemporary de-colonial, queer and feminist readers. This book did its best to sustain an argument diving into eleven case studies and strongly problematising the Western white cis gaze. Sofer offers readers a new perspective in both the history of music and the decolonisation of that history.

In a moment when discussions of consent, censorship, pleasure, and surveillance are reshaping how we think about media, Sofer asks: **What does sex *sound* like, and why does it matter?** Their analysis cuts across high art and popular culture, from avant-garde compositions to pop music to porn, revealing how sonic expressions of sex are never neutral—they're deeply entangled in gendered, racialized, and heteronormative structures. In doing so, *Sex Sounds* resonates with broader critical work on **listening as a political act**, aligning with ongoing conversations in sound studies about the ethics of hearing and the politics of voice, noise, and silence



The main focus of *Sex Sounds* is the historical loop of sexual themes in electronic music since the 1950s. Sofer writes from the perspective of a mixed-race, nonbinary Jewish scholar specializing in music theory and musicology. They argue that the way the Western world teaches music history involves hegemonic narratives. In other words, the author's impetus is to highlight the construction of mythological figures such as Pierre Schaeffer in France and Karlheinz Stockhausen in Germany who represent the canon of the Eurocentric music phenomena.

Sex Sounds specifically follows the concept of "Electrosexual Music," defined by Sofer as electroacoustic Sound and Music interacting with sex and eroticism as socialized aesthetics. The issue of representation in music is a key research focus navigating questions such as: "How does music present sex acts and who en*acts* them? " as well as: "how does a composer represent sexuality? How does a performer convey sexuality? And how does a listener interpret sexuality?" (xxiv & xxix). Moreover, Sofer traces: "the threats of representation, namely exploitation and objectification" (xxxvii) as the result of white male privilege and the historical harm and violence this means (xiix & 271).

By exploring answers to these questions, Sofer successfully exposes how electroacoustic sexuality has historically operated as a constant presence in many music genres, as well as proving that

music and sound did not begin in Europe nor belongs only to the Anglo-European provincial cosmos. *Sex Sounds* gives visibility to peripheral voices ignored by the Eurocentric canon, arguing for a new history of music where countries such as Egypt, Ghana, South Africa, Chile, Japan or Korea are central.

Sofer further vivisects the meaning of sexual sounds as not only Eurocentric and colonial but patriarchal and sexist. What is the history behind sex sounds in the electroacoustic music field? Can we find liberation in sex sounds or have they only reproduced dominance? Which role do sex sounds play in the territories of otherness and racial representation? Are there examples where minoritized people have reclaimed their voice? Sex is part of our humanity. But how do sex sounds dehumanize female subjects? These are more of the fundamental questions Sofer responds to in this study.



"Sin" image by Flickr User Derek Gavey ***CC BY 2.0***

> *I aim, first and foremost, to show that electrosexual music is far representative a collection than the typically presented electroacoustic figures -supposedly disinterested, disembodied, and largely white cis men from Europe and North America –Sofer, Sex Sounds,(xvi).*

The time frame of the study ranges from 1950 until 2012, analysing four case studies. Sofer divides the book in two parts: Part I: "Electroacoustics of the Feminized Voice" and Part II: "Electrosexual Disturbance." The first part contextualizes "electrosexual" music within the dominant cis white racial frame. The main argument is to demonstrate how many canonic electroacoustic works in the history of Western sound have sustained an ongoing dominance as a historical habit locating the male gaze at the center as well as instrumentalizing the 'feminized voice' as mere object of desire without personification and recognition as fundamental actor in the compositions. Under such a premise, Sofer vivisects sound works such as "Erotica" by the father of Musique Concretè

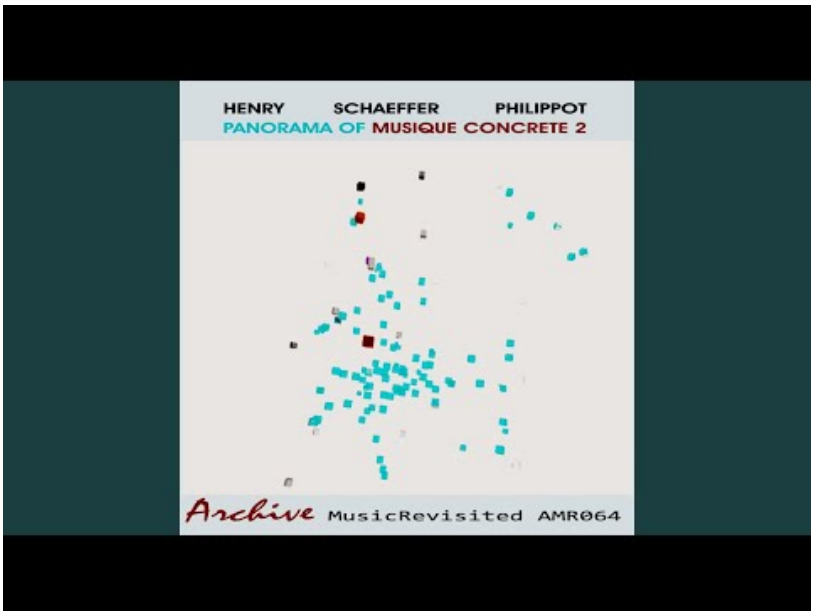
Pierre Schaffer and Pierre Henry (1950-1951), Luc Ferrari's "les danses organiques" (1973) and Robert Normandeu's "Jeu de Langues" (2009), among other pieces.



https://youtu.be/VUvBdVFQEr8

Luc Ferrrari's work from 1973 is one of many examples in which Sofer makes evident the question of consent, since the women's voices he includes were used in his work without their knowledge, a pattern of objectivation that mirrors structures of patriarchal domination. Sofer "defines and interrogates the assumed norms of electroacoustic sexual expression in works that represent women's presumed sexual experience via masculinist heterosexual tropes, even when composed by women" (xivii-xiviii). Sofer emphasises the existence of "distance" as a gendered trope in which women's audible sexual pleasure is presented as "evidence" in the form of sexualized and racialized intramusical tropes. Philosophically speaking, this phenomena, Sofer argues, goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche and his understanding of the "women's curious silence" (xxvii). In other words, a woman can be curious but must remain silent and in the shadows.

This is the case in Schaeffer and Henry's "Erotica" (1950-1951), one of the earliest colonial impetus to electrosexual music in which female voices are both present and erased, present in the recording but erased as subjects of sonic agency, since the composers did not credit the woman behind the voice recordings. She has no name nor authorship, but her sexualized voice is the main element in the composition. This paradox shows the issue of prioritising the 'Western' white European cis male gaze. This gaze uses women's sexuality as a commerce where only the composer benefits from this use. This exposes the problem of labor and exploitation within electroacoustic practice historically dominated by white men.



https://youtu.be/CdfiMV3DKHU

"Erotica" stands out for its sensual tension, abstract eroticism, and experimental use of the body as both subject and instrument. This work belongs to the hegemonic narrative of electroacoustic music with the use of sex sounds as aesthetic objects that insinuate erotic arousal as a construct of the male gaze.

Through examples like "Erotica" Sofer strongly questions the exclusion of women as active agents of aesthetic sonic creation since: "electroacoustic spaces have long excluded women's contributions as equal creators to men, who are more typically touted as composers and therefore compensated with prestige in the form of academic positions or board dominations" (xxxix). This book considers: "the threats of representation, namely exploitation and objectification" (xxxvii). Here we navigate the questions of how something is presented, by whom, and with which profit or intention. In other words, how sounds: "are created, for what purposes, and in turn, how sounds are interpreted and understood" (xxxiii).These are problems rooted in both patriarchy and capitalism.

This book is a strong contribution to decolonize the history of music as we know it, although the citations here could be richer, including studies by Rachel McCarthy ("Marking the 'Unmarked' Space: Gendered Vocal Construction in Female Electronic Artists" 2014), Tara Rodgers ("Tinkering with Cultural Memory: Gender and the Politics of Synthesizer Historiography" 2015), and the work of Louise Marshall and Holly Ingleton, who used intersectional feminist frameworks to analyze the work of marginalized composers (including women of color) and the curatorial practices that shape electronic music history. Also, not to forget: Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988).

Embed from Getty Images

Musical artist Sylvester

> *I argue that, although many composers of color work in electronic music, the search term 'electroacoustic' remains exclusionary because of who declares themselves as an advocate of this music, and not necessarily in how their music is made–Sofer, Sex Sounds, (xiv).*

After a deep dive into the genealogy of the patriarchal practices in electroacoustic music understood as *electrosexual* works (hence: "Sex is only *re*-presented in music p. xxix), Sofer moves to the territory of feminist contra-narratives. In the second part of their study, Sofer offers sonic practices and concrete examples that: "break the electroacoustic mold either by consciously objecting to its narrow constraints or by emerging from, building on, and, in a sense, competing with a completely different historical trajectory" (xlvi). Contra-narratives from the racialized periphery and underground landscapes appear in this book as case studies to hold the argument and expand the homocentric and patriarchal telos found even in the sonic archives as well as the Western theoretical corpus. These 'Others' reclaim their voices going a step further and gaining recognition.

After examining examples of racialisation and objectification, Sofer selects some case studies from 1975 to 2013 in the second chapter of this section titled: "Electrosexual Disturbance." In this section, Sofer also points to new forms of exclusion and instrumentalisation via "racial othering," specifically in the context of popular music such as Disco where we find an emphasis on the feminized voice. Disco, as a genre rooted in Black, queer, and marginalized communities, inherently grappled with racial and gendered dynamics. Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby" (1975) exemplifies this tension.



https://youtu.be/oFrXXqq7QvQ

The track's erotic vocal performance (23 simulated orgasms over 16 minutes) became emblematic of the hypersexualization of Black women in popular music. Summer's persona as the "first lady of love" reinforced stereotypes of Black female sexuality as inherently exotic or excessive, a trope traced to racist and sexist historical narratives. Simultaneously, disco provided a space for liberation: Black and LGBTQ+ artists like Summer, Sylvester, and Gloria Gaynor used the genre to

assert agency over their identities and bodies, challenging mainstream exclusion. The tropes of sex and race are a paradoxical combination bringing both oppression as well as liberation.

Sofer argues that Summers was commercially recognized but her figure as a composer was destroyed, creating consequently a hierarchy of labor. She was acknowledged for her amazing sexualized voice and performance on stage, but not recognized as a musician or equal to music producers. Here we see the practice of epistemological discrimination and extreme racial sexualisation. On the positive side, Summer became the Black Queen idol for gay liberation. Nevertheless, she remained as the sexualized and racial voice of the seventies.

Sofer also presents the case of ex-sex worker, sex-educator and radical ecosex-activist Annie Sprinkle collaborating in a post-porn art video with the legendary Texan and lesbian composer Pauline Oliveros. For Sprinkle and Oliveros, Sofer offers a different phenomena at work, since both queer-women/Lesbian-women collaborated from the point of feminist independence and sexual liberation coming together for educational purposes.



'Sluts & Goddesses (1992)' promotional image, courtesy of streaming service, MUBI

Sluts & Goddesses (1992) is a porn film with an Oliveros soundtrack, produced by radical women–with only women–in a self-determined frame. The movie offers an example of collaboration moving from avantgarde sound composition expertise to trashy whoring and interracial lesbian power. This example was rare, but inspiring for the coming generations. Two lesbian Titans united for electrosexual disturbance from the feminist gaze, Sprinkle and Oliveros were a duo that broke silence.

> *This book revisits the acousmatic in its electronic manifestations to examine and interrogate sexual and sexualized assumptions underwriting electroacoustic musical philosophies.–Sofer, Sex Sounds, (xxi)*

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Sofer's *Sex Sounds* enters into a vital and still-emerging conversation about how sound—particularly sonic expressions of sex and eroticism—shapes, disrupts, and reinscribes power. At a time when sonic studies increasingly reckon with embodiment, affect, and intimacy, Sofer brings a feminist and queer critique to the center of how we listen to, interpret, and culturally regulate the sounds of sex. Their book invites us to reconsider not only what we hear in erotic audio, but how we've been taught—socially, politically, morally—to hear it.

This book doesn't just fill a gap—it pushes the field toward a more nuanced, bodily-aware mode of scholarship. For *SO!* readers, *Sex Sounds* offers both a provocation and a methodology: it challenges us to hear differently, to ask how power works not only through what is seen or said, but through what is moaned, whispered, muffled, or made to be heard too loudly.

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Featured Image: "Stamen," by Flickr User Sharonolk, ***CC BY 2.0***

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Verónica Mota Galindo *is an interdisciplinary researcher based in Berlin, where they study philosophy at the Freie Universität. Their work goes beyond the academic sphere, blending sound art, critical epistemology, and community engagement to make complex philosophical ideas accessible to broader audiences. As a dedicated educator and sound artist, Mota Galindo bridges the gap between academic research and lived material experience, inviting others to explore the transformative power of critical thought and creative expression. Committed to bringing philosophy to life outside traditional boundaries, they inspire new ways of thinking aimed at emancipation of the human and non-human for collective survival.*

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